

Reel Russell

Tony Simpson

Martin Scorsese's magnificent film *The Irishman* recounts the deadly exploits of a paid killer. But there is a second Irishman mentioned in the script, President Kennedy, who was shot dead, in full public gaze, in Dallas in November 1963. Scorsese's neat sub-plot has the mafia running arms against Castro's Cuba, and ordering the President's murder. Certainly, that public assassination has never been satisfactorily explained.

In a recent interview, Scorsese acknowledges the influence of filmmaker Lionel Rogosin, whose 1958 documentary movie *On the Bowery* accurately depicted the streets of that part of New York where Scorsese grew up. Some years later, in 1966, Rogosin made *Good Times, Wonderful Times*, an avowedly anti-war film which featured rare and harrowing wartime footage from Russia, Japan and elsewhere, counterposed with cocktail party conversations in 'Swinging' London. The title quotes a Chelsea Pensioner recounting the best days of his life in the army. Russell makes a brief appearance.

Later in the 1960s, Rogosin teamed up with James (Jimmy) Vaughan to distribute Warhol and other art films in London. In the process, Vaughan somehow got his hands on raw footage of Bertrand Russell shot by another filmmaker, Emile de Antonio, for a visual obituary of the philosopher who was well into his tenth decade. Russell agreed to de Antonio's proposal of a filmed obituary whilst alive, having already penned his own obit and read another in *The Times*, when he was thought to have died in China in 1921. Mr de Antonio later, reluctantly, disassociated himself from the project.

Meanwhile, de Antonio had directed the



film version of *Rush to Judgment* (1967), debunking the official Warren Report about the murder of President Kennedy, based on the book of the same name by solicitor Mark Lane. Lane with de Antonio, Richard Stack, a rich young American, and Ralph Schoenman, one of Russell's secretaries until late '66, had formed a company in the United States to fund the film. Some Russell Foundation money went into the project, and the film created quite a stir. More than 50 years on, *Rush to Judgment* makes compelling viewing. Russell paid close attention to Mark

Lane's researches into the murder of the President, and formed the Who Killed Kennedy Committee with Hugh Trevor-Roper and Caroline Benn, among others.

But the Russell obituary film had come to grief. In November 1966, de Antonio wrote to Bertrand Russell resigning from the Peace Foundation, to which Russell had appointed him the previous year, adding that he found it 'painful to be unable to conclude the film about you which I have begun'. It seems de Antonio was unhappy with the footage that had been shot, which involved him, Schoenman and Lane questioning Russell, and he insisted on dissociating himself from the project. Several times, Russell requested the footage, which de Antonio offered and promised to send, and it seems it eventually reached the London offices of the Russell Foundation in late 1967. What happened to it after that?

Fast forward to February 1970 and Russell's death, in his 98th year. 'On the very day' Russell's death was announced, a Swedish broadcast journalist, Magnus Roselius, was on the phone to Mr Jimmy Vaughan of Vaughan-Rogosin Produktions (sic) in London. Vaughan mentioned that he had material on Russell that had never been shown before and that it was shot by de Antonio. Roselius duly edited the raw footage to produce a 23-minute portrait of Russell in which 'funny anecdotes mingled with



serious philosophy and an interesting life story'. Sadly, Swedish Television cannot trace the film.

Russell's 50th anniversary year, 2020, opens with exciting news that some 43 minutes of rough footage have been found in the Russell Archives at McMaster University in Canada. Bertrand Russell smiles beatifically while questioned by Mark Lane, Ralph Schoenman and Emile de Antonio before a roaring fire at home in Plas Penrhyn. Edith and Bertie muse on how England has changed as they and the filmmakers take the train from London to North Wales. Russell's disowned film obituary flickers to life before us.

Meanwhile, in 2019 the influential British Filmmaker Peter Whitehead died. Looking back on the 1960s, he wrote 'Counterculture in Britain did not start with mini-skirts and pop music but with the Aldermaston March, Vanessa Redgrave and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation (for whom I was covertly editing films smuggled out of north Vietnam).'